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The Labour party on the threshold

Westminster [London]

1923

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The Labour Party on the Threshold

By
SIDNEY WEBB

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The Chairman's Address to the Annual Conference of the Labour Party, 26th June, 1923

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THE LABOUR PARTY ON THE THRESHOLD.

By SIDNEY WEBB.

IT is just ten years since the Annual Conference of the Labour Party was last held in London; and it is natural that we should compare its position then and now. In 1913, after more than a decade of persistent, and often heroic work, the Party counted an affiliated membership of considerably under two millions. It could contest only one-tenth of the constituencies and in them could poll less than half a million votes. After three General Elections it had returned only six per cent. of the House of Commons. Its Parliamentary position was ambiguous. Whilst its principles were already definite enough, its programme was still very incompletely formulated. And up and down the country its organization was usually as shadowy as its programme.

To-day we see the Labour Party with about four million affiliated members, being at once the poorest and quite the largest political organization in the land; locally organized in all but half a dozen out of the 600 constituencies in Great Britain; placing some 10,000 elected representatives on the various municipal and other local councils; proclaiming not only principles but also a definitely formulated comprehensive programme over the whole range of home and foreign affairs; placing this programme before the electors in over 400 Parliamentary seats; polling in them alone four and a quarter million votes, being only a million or so fewer than the victorious Unionist Party in the whole country; returning just upon a quarter of the House of Commons; and becoming officially recognized as "His Majesty's Opposition," prepared to form an alternative Ministry whenever called upon to do so. And in the seven months that have elapsed since the General Election, the Labour Party has, in all the contested Bye Elections, increased its aggregate vote by ten per cent., and gained two seats. Those who are curious in statistics may be interested to compute that a continuation of the rising curve of Labour votes from the 62,698 of 1900,

through the 323,195 of 1906 and the 505,690 of January, 1910, the 2¾ millions of 1918, and the 4¼ millions of 1922, would produce a clear majority of the total votes cast in Great Britain somewhere about 1926. This forecast it is that we have now to make good.

THE TASK BEFORE US.

For our long and detailed programme at the last General Election—more specific, precise and unequivocal than that submitted by any other political party—of which some 15 million copies were printed for distribution to every registered elector in the 416 constituencies in which a Labour candidate was in the field, we polled, in November last, one-third of all the voters in Great Britain. In order to secure such a decisive majority of the whole House of Commons as will make it necessary for the Leader of the Opposition to be entrusted with the duty of forming a Labour Government, we have practically to transform our present one-third of all the voters into two-thirds. We have therefore to convince the bulk of the electors, not that the present Unionist Government is failing to deal successfully with the very grave problems, economic and social, domestic and international, with which the country is confronted, for that is obvious enough; but that these problems can be satisfactorily solved on the principles that we preach. It used to be objected that, however sound might be its principles, the Labour Party was, from inexperience and lack of education, unfit to assume the responsibilities of office. Whatever may have been the case in past years, this is not an accusation that would nowadays be made by any instructed person of candour. In the present House of Commons, comparing parties as wholes, I venture to say that, whilst there are differences of dialect, and sometimes of phraseology, I see no superiority whatever on the Unionist benches in economic and political knowledge, or even in the essentials of courtesy and good manners. In acquaintance with the facts of life, and in appreciation of the actual effects of governmental action, the Parliamentary Labour party is, I think, on an average, considerably ahead of the other parties. It habitually takes, as it seems to me, longer views, and aims at a larger expediency than either Ministers or the rank-and-file on the Government side. It is true that the members of the Labour Party, unlike so many Liberals and Unionists, have seldom to their credit years of success in the making of profit. It is not usually remembered, on the other hand, how extensive has been the experience of at least half of the Labour Members, and how valuable the business training thereby afforded, in the administration of the vast and ever-growing Consumers'

Co-operative Movement, and in the highly complicated work of the great Trade Unions. As for knowledge and experience of public administration, it might easily be calculated that the Labour Members have an average of far more years of service on municipal and other local councils than the members of either the Liberal or the Unionist Party. It is, indeed, time that the insolent gibes at the Labour Party for ignorance or incapacity were given up. In my brief experience of the House of Commons it is from the Unionist benches that I have heard the most numerous and the most egregious blunders in Political Economy. And certainly not even the most partial of its supporters would claim that the Treasury Bench has this year distinguished itself, either in finance or in law, in knowledge of international affairs or in that instinctive wisdom that we call statesmanship. It is common ground that the nation's public life appears at the moment barren of political genius of the first rank. But speaking merely as a lifelong student of Government, I have no hesitation in saying that the Parliamentary Labour Party will be able, when the time comes, to take over the responsibilities of office at least as competently as the majority of Ministers of different parties whose public administration during the last forty years it happens to have been my particular business to scrutinize and study both from inside their offices and from without.

THE IMMORAL TREATIES OF PEACE.

Let us turn now to the grave problems with which the nation is confronted. At the root of all our present troubles is the state of warlike tension from one end of Europe to the other, which is plainly the outcome of the unsatisfactory treaties by which the war was ended. The historian of the future cannot fail to record that Paris, in 1919, was a factory of international inefficiency on a quite calamitous scale. Today this inefficiency is patent to all men. Nearly five years have elapsed since the Armistice. But the necessary complicated economic organization of Europe as a commercial whole has not yet been restored; food surpluses and raw materials in one part can only with the utmost difficulty be exchanged for the products of labour in other parts; indeed, all sorts of additional barriers to the free movement of goods, persons and communication have been set up; we have not yet got even anything like a unified system of transport across the political frontier lines that have been so fantastically drawn across the map of Europe; among the peoples penury and privation almost universally prevail; even the mere material damages to the fields and factories of France have not been made good. Never perhaps in all history has

there been so impressive a failure as that of the statesmen to whom the world of 1919 entrusted the task of making a real peace. What was the cause of this failure? It has been said, with a great deal of truth, that the blunders embodied in these treaties, were the direct result of what is termed in theology an invincible ignorance. In spite of all the knowledge and wisdom with which their official subordinates provided the "Big Four," these great men apparently could not divest their minds from the idea that they were free to choose, irrespective of the hard facts of the situation, what they presumed to think was politically the best for their several countries or for themselves. Certainly, we of the Labour Party hold that the treaties failed because, almost from end to end, they ignored, on the one hand, economics, and on the other hand morality. I confess to the simple faith that morality, like economics, is actually part of the nature of things; and, in great matters and in small, whenever we fail to take into account the nature of things, our calculations and arrangements are inevitably brought to naught. But where the world itself went most wrong in 1919, and I think that all countries must share the blame, and the great majority of their citizens, was in the spirit with which the problem was approached. We can all see now that Europe could no more be rebuilt upon the passion of hate, the passion of greed, and the passion of fear than upon anger and violence. And neither hate nor greed, neither fear nor violence is brought more into accord with the requirements of economics or of ethics merely by being national instead of individual.

I say to-day that we ought as a nation to come out of our nationalist illusions of this kind. It is high time that we based our foreign policy, not on what we presume to think our rights, but on what we can discern to be in the common interests of the world; not on national hatred, national greed or even national fear, but on a sense of brotherhood with all men; not on what we may hope to make out of other nations to our own profit, but on how, with our peculiar gifts and special opportunities, we can best serve humanity as a whole. And as all the nations now discover they are in a very real sense members one of another, we shall find that brotherhood in whatever best serves humanity as a whole will be, in the long run, most conducive to the interests of each. What the Labour Party stands for is a policy of mutual service, as contrasted with a policy of the deliberate pursuit of profit for self—it matters not whether the self to be profited be the individual at the expense of other individuals, or the nation at the expense of other nations.

Such a foreign policy would promptly assert for this country that leading position in the concert of Europe which the present Government has abandoned. It would tell France plainly that we will go no step further with her in what seems to us a fatal policy of aggression, arising, as it seems, from what the psycho-analysts would call a "fear-complex" unworthy of a great nation. It would accept with cordiality the willingness of the German people, provided the claims to extravagant war indemnities are withdrawn, to make good, up to the limit of economic capacity, the material damage inflicted on the mines and buildings of France and Belgium, and to compensate the civilian victims of bomb or torpedo. It would, for the sake of a general settlement, waive all further claims, and press for a universal cancellation of inter-governmental war debts. It would convert the League of Nations into an organization absolutely world-wide, seeking to make it in its own sphere as continuously effective as is the International Postal Union. Such a policy would aim persistently and wholeheartedly at the earliest possible restoration to economic prosperity of all the nations of the world, including, as a matter of course, those with whom we were lately at war. It would make continuously for an ever-progressing common limitation of armaments. In my view, it would inspire our advocacy, within the League of Nations, of the establishment of some practicable international currency and some uninterrupted machinery of international remittances, possibly by the intermediation of the International Postal Union itself. It would work towards a universal suppression of customs and passport barriers; or at least their subordination to the far superior interest of unhampered intercommunication; and, assuming that the political particularism of the different states forbids at present a European Customs Union, at least for the establishment of a completely unified railway and canal administration from Astrachan to Algeciras, with undisturbed and untaxed passage of all goods and passengers merely in transit. And along with such an economic policy, there might be urged upon the Governments of Europe the adoption of a common policy of education in internationalism, in elementary schools and universities alike, in substitution for the ludicrously false history and economics still inserted, in the supposed interests of patriotism, in the school books of the world.

MAKING THE WEAKEST PAY FOR THE WAR.

I am not sure that there may not be some truth in the suggestion that it is not so much national particularism as the private interest of international Capitalism that is to-day the main obstacle to such a foreign policy as I have outlined. Certainly, if we turn to our own domestic problems we must, I fear, agree that it is essentially the determination of those who are wealthy to hold to their riches, and to their power over other people's lives, that is standing in the way of social reform. What is going on around us, often unconsciously to those concerned, is, fundamentally, a struggle as to who shall be financially the losers by the war, those who live by owning or those who live by working; and among those who do participate in industry, between those who do the initiating, directing and managing, or those who contribute the manual and routine mental labour. This it is that lies at the back of the almost universal attack upon wages of the past two years, which has extended to establishments and industries that are admittedly making large profits. This attack has already cost the wage-earners something like 700 million pounds a year, or nearly twice the whole of the payment this year in Income Tax. The employers' determination to pull down what they called the "swollen wages of war time" was, indeed, more than once openly avowed in 1919-20, though the opportunity came only in 1921-22. But we see the same thing elsewhere. There is, in all industrial and economic problems and reform projects, a very distinct "ruck up," even among those who were formerly inclined to philanthropy. Whether it be Housing or Education, the Trade Boards Act or the Shop Hours Act, provision for maternity and infancy or provision for the feeble-minded, there is a very decided check to any progress, almost avowedly on the ground that in face of the terrible taxation no more money can be spent without actually lessening the total net income available of the well-to-do class. One public-spirited local administrator put the case quite simply to me. If the County Council, he said, established the new institutions that were required, the increase in rates would compel him to give up his orchid house. This, of course, means that it is the feeble-minded and the mothers and infants, the children and the slum dwellers, the workers in the sweated trades, and generally all the wage-earners, who are to be made to bear the burden of the war debt. This was not the idea, let us say in justice to Mr. Bonar Law, of the Chancellor of the Exchequer of 1917. It is not the idea of the economists. It is certainly not the idea of the Labour Party, which must go on asserting that there can be no financial security, and indeed no complete

restoration of industrial prosperity in this country, so long as one million pounds have to be taken out of the product of labour each working day, before either wages are paid or profit is made, merely to defray the interest on the war debt. A War Debt Redemption Levy, on fortunes exceeding £5,000 in graduated proportion to the ability to pay, sufficient to redeem the main bulk of the debt, stands as the indispensable step to any stable economic order in this country.

THE INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGE.

There are three dominant features of the economic life of to-day peremptorily demanding the consideration of every statesman, and challenging every political party. There is the almost complete supersession, by subtle forms of trust and monopoly, of that free competition among capitalist enterprises which used to give the consumer at least some guarantee that prices would oscillate closely around the necessary cost of production. This problem, I find, reduces the candid statesman of either of the older parties privately to despair. He sees no solution. There is in the next place, that equivocal influence, if not sinister dominance, in all important issues of government, in the newspaper press, and even in educational and social organization, of the private interests of the owners of great masses of wealth. In the form in which it exists to-day, this is a new feature. I do not find that such Liberal or Unionist members of the House of Commons as I have talked to on the subject, even when they recognize its danger, have any idea of how to prevent this illegitimate dominance. And the third of these outstanding economic problems—into which, as it seems to me, both the others enter—is that of Unemployment; not so much in its present magnitude, which is exceptional and transient, but in its persistence and universality.

THE BANKRUPTCY OF THE "GOVERNING CLASS."

It would, I suppose, be very rude of us to "butt in" at the domestic recriminations of the conferences of either section of the Liberal Party—or to intrude on those more shrouded interchanges of counsel among the influential personages of the Unionist Party—with any peremptory challenge as to the substance of their respective policies. I fear that neither Liberalism nor Unionism would abide our questioning. But I may at least put the inquiry before this Conference. What has the Liberal Party—what has Mr. Asquith or Mr. Lloyd George—what has the Unionist Party under Mr. Baldwin—to propose to the consumer by way of protection against the now continuous profiteering of the various capitalist combinations that dominate prices? How does

either of these statesmen suggest that the illegitimate and almost limitless power of private wealth in the newspaper press and in public administration can be checked? Finally, does either of these parties or these statesmen believe that the British wage-earners will go on acquiescing in the common refusal to deal adequately and systematically with the tragedy of nation-wide unemployment? It is, I venture to say, in the failure of political leaders even to apply their minds to these three fundamental economic problems, still less, to permit them to appear in their political programmes, that stands revealed to-day the bankruptcy of both Liberalism and Conservatism.

LABOUR'S HOME POLICY.

The Labour Party at least grapples with these problems in all their ramifications. Where the candid Liberal or the honest Unionist admits that he sees no way out, the inquirer who comes to the Labour Party finds that it has principles, directly applicable to the very questions about which he is puzzled. And what has become unusual in political parties, the Labour Party has not only principles but also a practical programme worked out in considerable detail; and a programme which flows out of its principles, and is consistent with these. This consistency between party principles and party programme is indeed a luxury! Nothing strikes me with greater astonishment than the unabashed way in which Ministers, whether Liberal or Unionist, whenever they are compelled to grapple with a pressing evil, adopt, not an individualist solution, which is what, in my innocence, I used to expect from them, but always and inevitably a Collectivist solution. The policy that they continue to profess is, of course, violently Anti-Collectivist. But whenever they have actually to do anything in their several departments it is always a Collectivist line that they follow. Naturally, because along this line they lack both faith and knowledge; they make a botch. The nation will sooner or later see the wisdom of calling in those doctors who both understand and believe in what they prescribe.

Now, it is not my business here to expound once more the principles of the Labour Party; nor even to recite the titles of the Bills and pamphlets in which its practical programme is embodied. Any non-member who sends threepence to the Party Secretary at 33, Eccleston Square, will receive by return of post *Labour and the New Social Order,* in which he will find a comprehensive statement of what the Party stands for. I can best utilize my present opportunity by emphasizing for your own consideration certain general features of our position to-day.

"GRADUALNESS."

First let me insist on what our opponents habitually ignore, and indeed, what they seem intellectually incapable of understanding, namely the inevitable gradualness of our scheme of change. The very fact that Socialists have both principles and a programme appears to confuse nearly all their critics. If we state our principles, we are told "That is not practicable." When we recite our programme the objection is "That is not Socialism." But why because we are idealists, should we be supposed to be idiots? For the Labour Party, it must be plain, Socialism is rooted in political Democracy; which necessarily compels us to recognize that every step towards our goal is dependent on gaining the assent and support of at least a numerical majority of the whole people. Thus, even if we aimed at revolutionizing everything at once, we should necessarily be compelled to make each particular change only at the time, and to the extent, and in the manner in which ten or fifteen million electors, in all sorts of conditions, of all sorts of temperaments, from Land's End to the Orkneys, could be brought to consent to it. How anyone can fear that the British electorate, whatever mistakes it may make or may condone, can ever go too fast or too far is incomprehensible to me. That indeed, is the supremely valuable safeguard of any effective democracy.

But the Labour Party, when in due course it comes to be entrusted with power, will naturally not even want to do everything at once. Surely, it must be abundantly manifest to any instructed person that, whilst it would be easy to draft proclamations of universal change, or even enact laws in a single sitting purporting to give a new Heaven and a new Earth, the result, the next morning, would be no change at all, unless, indeed, the advent of widespread confusion. I remember Mr. Bernard Shaw saying, a whole generation ago, "Don't forget that, whilst you may nationalize the railways in one afternoon, it will take a long time to transform all the third-class carriages and all the first-class carriages into second-class carriages." Once we face the necessity of putting our principles first into Bills, to be fought through committee clause by clause; and then into the appropriate administrative machinery for carrying them into execution from one end of the Kingdom to the other—and this is what the Labour Party has done with its Socialism—the inevitability of gradualness cannot fail to be appreciated. This translation of Socialism into practicable projects, to be adopted one after another, is just the task in which we have been engaged for a whole generation, with the result that, on every side, fragments of our proposals

have already been put successfully into operation by town and county councils, and the national government itself, and have now become accepted as commonplaces by the average man. The whole nation has been imbibing Socialism without realizing it! It is now time for the subconscious to rise into consciousness.

INCREASING RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACT AND WORD.

Let me add a word in passing about our position as a party in this matter. The Labour Party, after more than twenty years' strenuous work, has now attained the position of the Official Opposition, holding itself out to the electors as the Alternative Government, prepared to take over the whole administration of the nation as soon as it is called upon to do so. The Party must remember this position, and rise to its responsibilities. We have, from now onward, to work and speak and act, under the sense of the liability, at any moment, to be charged with putting our plans and projects in operation. This does not mean, I suggest, that we should abandon our investigations and researches whether individual or departmental, which have proved of the greatest value in putting us ahead of the other political parties, or give us refining and enlarging our ideals, or as individuals, cease the expounding of inspiring visions of what the future might and should unfold. But it does mean, I suggest, that we should not lightly commit ourselves as a party—and we should not even seek to commit the party as a party—to new or additional projects, or to the details of reforms, if these belong more appropriately to a stage of greater freedom and less responsibility.

THE FUTILITY OF VIOLENCE.

This brings me to the suggestion that surely every citizen of our own land must see, in the experience of the past decade, an overwhelming demonstration of the fact that violence is, and must be, always accursed, injuring both him who does and him who suffers it, and futile to both. Violence persuades no one, convinces no one, satisfies no one. Thus, it may produce death, or the acquiescence which is the death of the mind—that is to say violence may destroy, but it can never construct. Moreover, in our practical British way we can see that, by the very nature of the case, violence can be much more easily and effectively applied on the Conservative side—to keep things as they are, because this requires only acquiescence—than on the side of change, because every change requires the active participation of the citizen, the adoption of new methods of life and work, or at least the

formation of new habits. What has happened in the United States on the one hand, and in Italy on the other, where property, in small holdings as well as great, has successfully used violence against the popular cause, are but examples of the general proposition that when it comes to the brutalities of physical force, reaction easily goes one better than the revolutionary mob. It is when the decision is arrived at by counting heads, not by breaking them, that we get the nearest approach to Government of the people, by the people, for the people. At any rate it is in this faith that the Labour Party is rooted.

THE ABUSE OF AUTHORITY.

Let me add that in my judgment it behoves us to weigh our words when we voice our intuitive objection to the authority of government. We must, of course, be outspoken in our denunciation of every form of governmental tyranny, whether "white," "red," black or any other colour, at home or abroad, in Asia and Africa as well as in Europe and America. The public opinion of the civilized world—for which in this matter the Labour Party has largely the responsibility—has a real influence, slow moving though it be, even over the most obdurate of authorities. We have need to exercise the greatest vigilance to detect and at once oppose every instance of the illegal exercise of power, to which all governments, whether democratic or monarchical, municipal or national, are perpetually prone. Even in the land of Habeas Corpus, as recent instances show, we have by no means yet recovered all the liberties that we lost during the war. The strenuous and ultimately successful fight against the Home Secretary's arbitrary Irish deportations, which was maintained by the Labour Party, in the House of Commons, in the constituencies and in the Courts of Justice, will, I hope, be repeated whenever fresh cases occur.

THE MEANING OF GOVERNMENT.

But whatever is done to safeguard individual liberty, and to safeguard it, also, against economic and social as well as against governmental tyranny, let us always remember that it is not against government itself that we are protesting. For government is, after all, only another word for that deliberate co-operation of citizens in a common task which lies at the root of all our proposals. The alternative to government is not freedom. It is the very anarchy of competition, unrestrained and unregulated, from which the world is still suffering; it is, in short, fighting, whether between individuals, between groups, between classes, or between nations; fighting which, even when limited to what

we blandly call economic weapons, is inevitably destructive of personal liberty on a far greater scale than any governmental tyranny can be. When this fighting takes the form of war we see that it destroys civilization itself. The only alternative to the struggle expressed by the sinister maxim, "Every man for himself, and the Devil take the hindmost," is, let us remember, exactly that deliberately arranged co-operation among citizens in social tasks that we term government. To-day, I make bold to say, what the world needs is not less government but more. This need for a perpetually increasing co-operation in social functions, in place of individualist anarchy, springs inevitably from the ever-growing complexity of the social life of crowded populations, in which this very co-operation is the condition under which alone individual liberty can be maximized. We enjoy actually greater freedom on the highways because there is a Rule of the Road, than we should if everyone drove as the whim of the moment dictated. It is because we want more government internationally (and thereby a wider measure of national freedom in any real sense) that we support the League of Nations, and seek to render it both more democratic and more and more effective as an instrument of world control. At the other end of the scale we ask perpetually for greater powers for our Town Councils, and other local authorities, and we look to their obtaining an ever-widening sphere for their beneficent administration by which the freedom of the mass of the people to live their own lives is so much increased. And even at Whitehall, though we grumble at bureaucracy, it is not a diminution but an increase that in the name of freedom the Labour Party demands in the functions exercised, for instance, in connection with mines and railways, shipping and insurance, health and housing or the conditions under which ninety per cent. of the people have to work and live. What we have always to insist on is that government should, at all points, be effectively democratized; that it should be, wherever practicable, entrusted to the local representatives of the community, rather than to the necessarily centralized departments at Whitehall; that in every branch the widest possible sphere should be assigned to the voluntarily associated Consumers' Co-operative Movement, which, be it remembered, is, to the Socialist, an integral part of Socialism itself; and that everywhere the necessary supervision and control to be exercised by Parliament and the Central Government should be supplemented by a steadily increasing participation in management by the vocational organizations of all grades of workers concerned. How difficult it is to make the academic philosophers, not to mention Lord Chancellors, understand that vocational organization

is itself an indispensable part of democratic government—that political democracy without industrial democracy is a sham! But subject to these improvements in governmental machinery—improvements which, I admit, are of the essence of the case—I repeat that, in my opinion, what the world needs to-day—what Britain needs to-day—what even the Labour Party needs to-day is, not less government but more.

THE SPIRIT THAT GIVETH LIFE.

Finally, let me remind you that there is a higher need even than government, whether it be the government of a city or the government of our tempers or the government of our tongues. It is not upon its plans or its programmes—not even upon its principles or its ideals—that a political party is ultimately judged. It is not upon them or any of them that its measure of success in the continuous appeal to the judgment of the average citizen finally depends. The success of the Labour Party in this country depends, more than on anything else, upon the spirit in which we hold our faith, the spirit in which we present our proposals, the spirit in which we meet our opponents in debate, the spirit in which we fulfil our own obligations, the spirit in which, with inevitable backslidings, we live our own lives. We shall not achieve much, whatever changes we can bring about, unless what we do is done in the spirit of fellowship. For we must always remember that the founder of British Socialism was not Karl Marx but Robert Owen, and that Robert Owen preached not "class war" but the ancient doctrine of human brotherhood—the hope, the faith, the living fact of human fellowship—a faith and a hope reaffirmed in the words of that other great British Socialist—William Morris—in *The Dream of John Ball.* "Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell; fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death; and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them; and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from the earth shall wane."

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